

Alphabetime

Recently a family of foxes moved into a nearby garden. They're pretty discrete about their new home. Whenever you meet them face to face they behave courteously and deferentially as though they're making clear that their presence really, really isn't a problem. They've made friends with the humans whose garden they share. They play with the neighbourhood cats. They've found a way to be wild animals living close to the domesticated world. They've found a way to be neighbours.

Chickens live in the garden over the wall from where the foxes have made their home. At night the foxes can be heard mimicking the daytime sounds the chickens make when they're let out of their run. It's uncanny. Over the weeks the foxes worked to perfect the sounds. At first the chicken noise in the throats of the foxes sounded sarcastic, like the foxes were mocking the birds' cries. In time their utterances became more nuanced and convincing. The foxes had grown proficient at speaking a language not their own.

Who knows what the foxes' motivation for language-learning really is. I suspect it's not pure-intentioned. But the foxes' approximation at the language of another species is making me think of the way in human development we all understand at some point in our infancy that the gurgles and cries we use to elicit our caregivers' attention have a limit. Instead we begin to tune into the strange noise that adult conversation makes over our heads. One day we try and join in, mimic the sound of that weird alien language in an attempt to make ourselves heard, to become part, to be equal. Learning to speak the language of others is about entering the social world and always about survival.

Language. Survival. Making society.

Here in 2023 the world is re-emerging from the first global pandemic of the century. As the social world starts up and we re-enter the environment freely once again we're faced with two burning questions: How can we remake society after a time of social distance? How do we now relate to the world around us, a world we're slowly making uninhabitable?

Art may well be one of the few sites at the moment that offers the time and space for contemplation of these questions. That's why Idit Nathan's *A-Z of an Uncertain Future* is such an important project and such a nuanced response to the critical situation we currently inhabit. On one hand there's Nathan's playful use of collage – an approach that enables meanings that arise from past, present and future to triangulate with an aliveness to the moment that produces insight. On the other there's Nathan's strategy to create an alphabet, the building blocks for a new system of language, a new language for possible new futures.

On simple terms the alphabet invites the viewer to think back to the situation of learning and to the very first time we began to understand that the system of sounds we used to form words could be organised by letters – a learning which gave us the facility to write and read the words we spoke. Now our use of language wasn't just about what we said in the moment but also about time, about recording and processing thought in written language to be returned to in aftermath. It was also about space. Reading enabled us to travel far beyond our immediate environment. Learning the alphabet gave us the keys to enter a new world-wide-open social space.

Alphabets were invented in the first instance to enable Egyptian slave owners to communicate the hard work they expected of their slaves to slaves who couldn't speak the language of their owners. Slaves were usually not sourced within a people's own tribe/ethnicity. Only 'others' could be slaves but that brought problems. If your slave workforce didn't speak your language – how could you command them in the precise art of building something as ambitious as pyramids for instance. From a cynical need, from a survivalist need it was those early slave owners who invented the first form of alphabet, matching an ordered system of images to actions, enabling some form of communication beyond the bluntness of compulsion. The alphabet was a tool of making society – however unfairly so that in the end communication could happen between people who were different.

Alphabets developed across the course of human history – enabling us to conceive of language as a system of logic, that can be written, read as well as spoken. The alphabets of the world have been used to cover large territories. Not every human on the planet shares the same alphabet but the alphabets themselves map areas of communality that defy national borders and add layers to the cultural landscape.

Idit Nathan's *A-Z of an Uncertain Future* here plays with this history as she reverses the process gifting us images to free us once again to learn, to make associations. As with all her work, Nathan's use of intelligent play encourages viewers to find new ways to engage with the histories, the present imperatives and possible futures each collage speaks.

Today our visual landscape is filled with images designed to create sensation. As Nathan makes clear our lexicon of visual language exploits climate change disaster, man-made atrocity and the consequences of both – the mass movement of people across the world. There has never been a more important time to find a way to deconstruct these images, free them from their dulled servitude to information transmission to re-engage with their actual meaning. In Nathan's hands these collages offer us new possibilities for dialogue. *A-Z of an Uncertain Future*: what a gift – a lexicon for the articulation of new ideas, catalysts for action.

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